



HOLLYWOOD'S COMEDY DUO

THE ABBOTT & COSTELLO STORY

Part 1

The good looking, cherubic young man sat amongst the other film extras and waited for his cue from director Clyde Bruckman. The film set at the Hal Roach studios had been constructed to look like a boxing hall. Centre stage was a square boxing ring and on one side of the ring, rows of wooden seats had been erected for the extras who had been hired as the scene's spectators.

The two-reel silent short being shot was *The Battle of the Century* (1927), a comedy take-off of the controversial "long count" Jack Dempsey vs. Gene Tunney heavyweight boxing match. The film featured Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, with Stan playing the part of prize fighter Canvasback Clump and Hardy as his manager. As the young man intently studied how both Laurel and Hardy prepared themselves for the scene, the director shouted "Action".

The crowd of extras began hollering and gesticulating as Stan Laurel ran around the ring in an attempt to escape from his opponent, the scary Thunder-Clap Callahan (played by Noah Young). The young extra reacted incredulously as he leapt from the second row to a ringside seat between shots before the director called "Cut and Print".

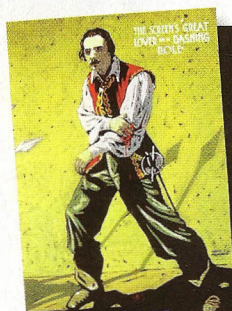
This silent short is a fascinating piece of film history and film buff trivia, for it unites Laurel and Hardy with half of the film comedy

team that would eventually eclipse them in the 1940s.

The young would-be actor was the second son of an Italian immigrant family and was born Louis Francis Cristillo in Paterson, New Jersey, in 1906. From an early age Lou became fascinated with the world of entertainment and whenever he could, frequented the vaudeville and nickelodeon houses of Paterson. He was also a keen sportsman and had made the basketball and boxing team at high school, but because of his diminutive size – five foot, four inches – realised he was never going to make it as a professional ball player or prizefighter.

Chasing the American Dream, he decided he would become a comedy movie star and would base his act on his idol, Charlie Chaplin. Lou went to see Chaplin's *Shoulder Arms* (1918) dozens of times, until he could repeat every scene and every Chaplin gesture. Consequently, when he reached the age of 20, he announced to his family that he was leaving home. "And where do you think you're going?" his exasperated father asked. "To Hollywood," Lou replied resolutely, quickly adding, "Pop, I ain't no academic but I'm not gonna be just a floorwalker in a department store. I'm gonna go out to Hollywood, change my name to Lou Costello and become a movie star. I know I can do it."

Following weeks of family arguments over why he wanted to go and why he wanted to



John Gilbert
BARDELYS
The MAGNIFICENT



← Lou Costello's first movie as a stuntman

↓ MGM Studios in the late 1920s, around the time Lou Costello started work there

change his family name, Lou's father finally relented and even managed to find \$200 for his son's journey.

Lou began his trek across country to California by hitching lifts with motorists or jumping aboard freight trains, until finally, in early 1926, he arrived in Los Angeles. The wide, palm tree-lined avenues and the sun-kissed gardens appeared to be paradise to Lou after the urban jungle of New Jersey, which only further convinced him that he had

made the right move.

However, much like the hundreds of young hopefuls who had all flocked to Hollywood to be discovered, no-one noticed the boy from New Jersey. As his money dwindled, a dejected Lou was too proud to write home and admit his failure to make it in Tinseltown. Exhausted from surviving on stolen fruit from the plentiful neighbourhood orchards and sleeping in overnight parked cars, Costello was about to start hitch-hiking back to Paterson when he landed a job at the MGM studios – as a carpenter building film sets.

It was not what he had predicted but at least he was employed by a major film studio. During his lunch breaks, the mesmerised Costello roamed around the MGM lots watching movies being filmed. One day he wandered onto Lot 2, where the studio's major star, John Gilbert, was starring in the swashbuckler *Bardleys the Magnificent* →



↑ Bud Abbott and Lou Costello

(1926). King Vidor, the director, had reached a scene in the script where one of Gilbert's swordsman victims had to fall from the top of a high structure. "Damn", shouted Vidor to his AD. "We'll have to get a stuntman for this shot and that means we'll lose time while they prepare the ground to cushion the fall." "I'll do it Mr. Vidor," volunteered Costello, and without waiting for an answer, he scrambled up the back of the false structure and jumped. Both Vidor and Gilbert winced as Costello fell to the ground, rolled and sat up. "OK?" he asked. Vidor hired him on the spot and called for wardrobe. An extra playing a guard in the film helped Costello to his feet and said, "That was a helluva fall fellah". The extra's name was Duke Morrison, which he would soon change to John Wayne.

Over the next two years Costello became the busiest and most daring stuntman at MGM, doubling for a number of stars including Joan Crawford and Dolores Del Rio. In between stunts he appeared as an extra in various films such as the L&H two-reeler. However, the end of his stunt



↑ Lou Costello performing his burlesque act with an unknown piano player

career came when he was seriously injured whilst impersonating actor William Haines in a football movie. Hospitalised, suffering numerous broken bones, Costello realised that he had pushed his luck too far as a stuntman.

It was now 1928 and the film industry was hysterical over the addition of audio; studios had finally realised that "talkies" were not just a novelty but were here to stay. Film work



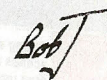
dried up for the limping ex-stuntman, forcing the distraught Costello to head for home, back to New Jersey.

He got as far as St. Joseph, Kansas, before his cash ran out and he noticed a sign on a burlesque theatre marquee: Comic Required, Apply Within. Bluffing the manager that he had been out in Hollywood making motion pictures and was now on his way to New York for a vaudeville engagement, he asked for the job. The burlesque manager was desperate enough to hire the inexperienced youngster, and Costello's previous study of Chaplin and other film comedians now served him well.

He learnt fast, soaking up all the expertise of the other comics and straight men he watched on stage. Now with a hastily thrown together act, he moved from theatre to theatre, playing a week at a time until

eventually he reached the East coast. One night, whilst Lou was on stage in New York working his act with a guy named Joe Lyons, he was watched from the wings by a tall, well dressed man. As Lou exited the stage, the man said, "Nice act kid, but your straight man's letting you down". "Oh! Yeah, and who the hell are you?" replied a belligerent Costello. The tall man extended his hand and said, "The name's Abbott, Bud Abbott."

To be continued...





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Part 2

When Bud Abbott first met Lou Costello in 1936 he was already an established and well respected straight man for comedians on the burlesque circuit. He was born William Alexander "Bud" Abbott in Asbury Park, New Jersey, on October 25th 1895, and as both his parents worked for the Barnum & Bailey Circus, show business was in his blood from an early age. His mother was a bareback rider and his father Harry an "advance man", who preceded the circus posting advertising bills and arranging free tickets for the dignitaries of the towns the circus was coming to. When Harry finally tired of travelling with the circus, he moved his family to Coney Island, New York, where he organised a number of burlesque shows. He appointed his sixteen-year-old son Bud as box office manager cum assistant treasurer of a theatre in Brooklyn.

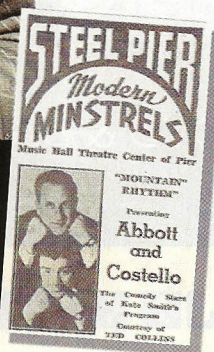
The young Bud found the financial side of theatre management, selling tickets and



↑ The dapper Bud Abbott

→ A poster advertising A&C at the Steel Pier Theatre, NJ

↗ Minsky's Burlesque Theatre in New York



paying wages, tedious. He much preferred to hang around backstage studying the routines and talking to the many comedians his father employed. Some of the burlesque comedians he avidly watched, such as W. C. Fields, Bert Lahr (The Cowardly Lion in *The Wizard of Oz*) and the original funny girl Fanny Brice, would later become Hollywood movie stars.

One night, when he could not afford to pay for a straight man to support the show's comedian, Bud decided to take on the role himself. Like all the good straight men he had watched over the years, Bud took meticulous care with his dapper appearance, in

complete contrast to the usual outrageous outfits worn by burlesque comedians. He had also learned from his observations how to play the serious foil to the comic, and by sensing the audience's mood, how a sarcastic ad-lib retort from him could frequently receive the loudest laughter. Every burlesque artiste who watched his performance that night noticed that he appeared to have an uncanny ability for making the comic seem funnier than he actually was. Furthermore, they all agreed that Bud Abbott would go far if he ever found a comic to team up with – one who could react to his rapid fire dialogue.

Following their initial meeting at the Eltinge Theatre in New York, Bud and Lou performed on the same bill but with separate partners. Over the several weeks that the show

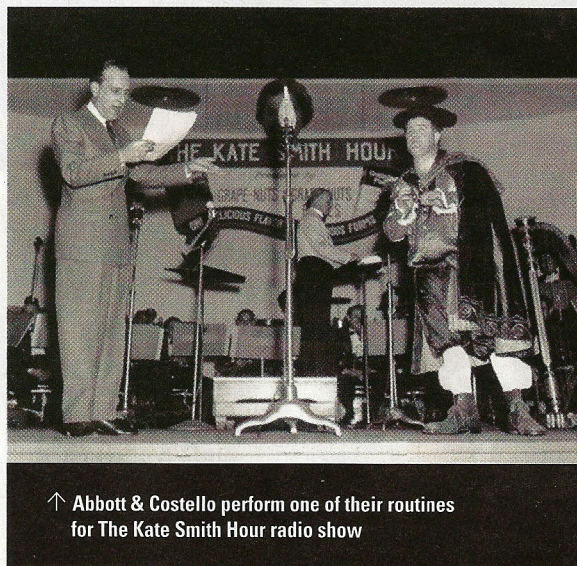


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played they became better acquainted, and discussed their various individual sketches and routines. Bud reiterated his earlier comment that Lou's partner was letting him down. "Your straight man, Joe Lyons, is okay, but he don't have no style. You have style but you go a little wild sometimes and when you do, you bore the audience. You need someone to pull you back". Lou appeared a little dejected, then replied, "Yeah! Joe's drinking a lot before the show, which sometimes makes him forget to feed me a line. I then have to ad-lib to keep the act moving". Lou continued, "Bud, you have a lot more experience than me in burlesque which I respect. How about us putting an act together, Costello & Abbott has a nice ring to it, don't ya think?". Bud shook his head, "You know the straight man always goes first. It's gotta be Abbott & Costello". A smiling Lou replied, "OK, partner".

Their first act together was performed at the famous burlesque theatre Minsky's in New York City. To appreciate Abbott & Costello's unique humour one has to understand the tradition in which it was rooted. Burlesque was a peculiar American institution, a kind of poor man's theatre with various risqué acts that contained ribald humour and immodestly dressed women. The name was taken from the Spanish word 'burlarse', which means to mock – originally the acts had deliberately spoofed the hit Broadway shows and operas that were frequented by the rich gentry. Burlesque was loud, uncouth and often downright salacious, but it became wildly popular during the Great Depression of the 1930s. For just a few cents, male patrons could purchase a ticket and be bawdily entertained for a couple of hours. Consequently, burlesque had a sleazy reputation and moralists of the day expressed outrage and demanded action be taken against the burlesque theatre managers. Minsky's Theatre was closed down many times by the police for allowing their girl strippers to remove too much of their scanty costumes (as memorably portrayed in William Friedkin's 1968 movie *The Night They Raided Minsky's*). Finally in 1937, re-elected New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia refused to renew the licences for burlesque theatres until the managers adhered to new rules that forbade all striptease acts. This action alone hastened the demise of the burlesque show.

And yet Abbott & Costello's act was never licentious. They certainly based their routines on the old classic burlesque sketches, but always without the heavy sexual innuendos. Their skits were primarily a nonsensical mix of malapropisms and miscommunications delivered with flawless timing, which they



↑ Abbott & Costello perform one of their routines for The Kate Smith Hour radio show

had honed to perfection. Bud played the glib tongued smartarse who would abusively harangue the hapless, child-like dimwit Lou for always misunderstanding Bud's fast talking dialogue, which dissolved into hilarious verbal mayhem.

Their quick-witted repartee soon made them the most popular comedy team on the burlesque circuit, but with the now dwindling number of burlesque theatres, they needed to break into the vaudeville variety shows. They signed up with theatrical agent Eddie Sherman, who got them a two week booking in a minstrel show at the Steel Pier Theatre, Atlantic City, New Jersey. They went down a storm; their routines had the family audiences convulsing with laughter and the pair's impeccable delivery of the word heavy sketches astonished their comedy colleagues and the theatre management. Consequently, this led to a ten-week review at the Pantages Theatre, which at the time was considered to be the top vaudeville venue in America.

During this run Sherman got them signed up with the William Morris talent agency, who promised to get the duo national exposure. In February 1938, they were heard nationally for the first time on The Kate Smith Hour, a very popular music and comedy CBS radio programme. They received enough applause from the show's audience to earn them a return engagement. But radio listeners complained that they could not discern Abbott's voice from Costello's, as they both spoke with New Jersey accents. This led directly to Costello adopting a high-pitched voice to differentiate him from his partner.

For their next broadcast they performed what would become their signature sketch: the Baseball Routine "Who's on First?" The

sketch had many variations, but usually began with Lou asking Bud the batting order of the St Louis baseball team. Bud: "Well the players have peculiar names in the team. Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know is on third."

Lou: "Yeah! that's what I want to find out."

Bud: "I'm telling you Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know is on third."

Lou: "You know the guys' names?"

Bud: "Yes."

Lou: "Well then, who's playin' first?"

Bud: "Yes."

Lou: "I mean the player's name."

Bud: "Who."

Lou: "The player on first base."

Bud: "Who is on first base."

Lou: "What are you asking me for, I don't know?"

Bud: "I Don't Know is on third."

This slick and hilarious routine goes on



↑ Abbott & Costello performing their famous act "Who's On First?"

for ten minutes, with an exasperated and frantic Lou continually confusing the players odd names with the order of batting.

The response from radio listeners across the country was enormous – thousands of fan letters poured into the CBS studios requesting more sketches from Mr. Abbott & Mr. Costello. Their phenomenal success in this weekly national radio show would now open the door to Hollywood.

To be continued...

Bob J